Harvey Cushing: The man

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The complex personality of Harvey Cushing becomes evident as one reads John Fulton's fascinating and monumental biography.7 As Paul Bucy has said,2 Harvey Cushing was indeed "a genius, derived largely from determination, hard work and extraordinary persistence — and like all geniuses he was a difficult man with whom to live." But, Paul continues, "all the difficulties shrink into insignificance in the blinding light of his achievements." It seems almost sacrilege to attempt any critical assessment of one who, almost singlehandedly, abolished forever the terrible specter of "brain fungus" which was the appalling end-result of the old operation of temporal decompression for brain tumor, still common when I was a student.

I was personally most fortunate in meeting Harvey Cushing a number of times, first in the 1920's when he visited the Sherringtons in Oxford, then again in the early 1930's when he would look in at the National Hospital in London to visit with Geoffrey Jefferson or Hugh Cairns, and in 1936 I saw him several times when I was working with John Fulton in New Haven. Finally, on the day when Queen Mary was to open the new wing at the National Hospital in London in July, 1938, I found him standing, waiting patiently at the back of the crowd, for the Queen to appear. I was able to get him a seat next to Jefferson in the front row, for it was then difficult for him to stand for long. On all these occasions he was on his best behavior and one immediately sensed his charm and charisma. He was of medium height, handsome, with a disarming smile and warm manner, yet with a bird-like imperious gaze. I evidently reminded him of George Denny, a colleague of his in Base Hospital No. 5 in 1917-1918, for he invariably mentioned him.

This is how he was when relaxed and not under the pressure of incessant operating and writing. His assistants and pupils knew another Cushing — his intense and relentless application to a problem for hours on end, and biting criticism of any minor aberration on the part of an assistant — the origin of Geoffrey Jefferson's remark about Cushing's devoted assistants standing around "licking their wounds, but proud of where they got them."7 He had a quick sense of humor but his outlook on life was definitely Puritan. He disliked off-color stories, says Jefferson, drank little alcohol, smoked a lot but disapproved of smoking or cocktails in the family circle. He was most fastidious in dress and personal appearance. He was a good talker but a bad listener, tending to cross-examine the narrator. He did not allow himself to digress and waste his energies on unrewarding matters. As Jefferson says "he could be charming, tiresome, delightful, petty and admirable all by turns."8 He pursued the scientific ideal with the utmost intensity, and sometimes sacrificed his friends to it (as for example in his break with Dandy, by what Fulton concluded was a totally unjustified attack). His tactlessness sometimes got him into grave trouble, as when in France in 1917 he was saved from a court martial for a rather stupid verbal indiscretion only by the personal intervention of General Pershing.7 In 1920 he arranged the first meeting of what was to become the Society of Neurological Surgeons, inviting a national group of 10 charter members to Boston (including Frazier of Philadelphia, Sachs of St. Louis, Bagley of Baltimore, Elsberg from New York, and Adson from the Mayo Clinic). He had Jason Mixter, a mild and courteous man, arrange dinner for them all at the Harvard Club. As Bucy tells it,7 the group had just finished soup when Cushing stood up and said he had some more patients at the Brigham Hospital to show them, and they should come with him now. Jason protested, but Cushing strode from the room saying that those who were only interested in food could stay, and those interested in scientific medicine should follow him. His brashness was already apparent during his first trip to Europe in 1901, not only in his criticism of Kraneker, but also when, during a month's stay in Liverpool visiting Sherrington's laboratory, he offered George Cox, Sherrington's trusted and well trained only laboratory assistant, a large increase in wages if he would go to Baltimore with him.

As a man of action he belittled medical neurologists, teasing them about the few neurological diseases that could be "cured." Few would have had the
temerity to remind him that the "cure" for the common brain tumor, the glioblastoma, was yet to be found.

He had great difficulty in acknowledging that he could be wrong, yet on other occasions he could be most magnanimous. My former chief, Sir Charles Symonds of London, relates how, when he worked for some months as a voluntary assistant with Cushing at the Brigham, he had suggested the diagnosis of suprasellar aneurysm in a patient on whom Cushing was about to operate. Cushing scoffed at the suggestion. An uncontrollable hemorrhage terminated the operation. It happened that the only time Cushing could attend the autopsy was the following afternoon, on which Symonds and the resident, and, as it transpired later, Cushing himself, had tickets for a critical world series baseball game. Cushing decided that the autopsy would be held at that time anyway, and that they all must be present, which they were. When the aneurysm was disclosed he turned to Symonds: "Symonds you made the correct diagnosis; either it was a fluke, or there was a reason for it. If so you will prove it. You will cease your ward duties as from now and spend all your time in the library." The resulting paper, giving the first account of the significance of subarachnoid hemorrhage in the diagnosis of aneurysm, with an addendum by Cushing, appeared in 1923.9

It could have been predicted that the earthy country boy from downstate Illinois, Percival Bailey, would clash with the fastidious and puritanical Cushing. Bailey tells of his recurrent unhappiness during the 10 years he was with Cushing.1 "We disagreed often, sometimes vigorously. When the tension became too great I went away for a while. But I always came back. When I did there were neither apologies nor reproaches. We simply began again where I left off. He was not an easy man to work with but my debt to my master is incalculable." Cushing was a man of intense magnetism. One was either repelled or attracted. It was impossible to be indifferent to him. He was always scrupulously honest in all his transactions, would write long and encouraging letters to his former pupils, and was known for many acts of charming generosity.

In addition to his preoccupation with his neurosurgical triumphs was his passionate love of books on historical medicine. It might be supposed that this was derived from his early association with Osler and the Hopkins Historical Club in Baltimore. As we shall describe later it had a much earlier origin. Also his distinctive and elegant style of writing, illuminated by admirable small sketches, was already apparent in his early letters. His consuming interest in Vesalius, the 16th century anatomist, was that of a collector, beginning with his acquisition of a small biography of Vesalius by Moritz Roth when he was a graduate student. His first copy of Vesalius' Fabrica (the most famous medical book of all time) was a present of an imperfect 1543 edition from his friend W. G. MacCallum in 1903.9 From that time onward he vied with Osler in pursuing every bibliographic detail of Vesalius and his contemporaries. It was characteristic of Cushing's enquiring mind that he should often fasten on some whimsical aspect of a subject. He found, for example, by rearranging the plates reproduced by Roth from the Fabrica that the background of the "muscle men" became a continuous panorama. He carried the plates with him on trips to Europe, hoping to identify the scene, but was eventually forestalled by his friend Willy Wiegand, the publisher of Munich, who found that it is a sketch of the Bacchiglione river and Euganean Hills just south of Padua, where Vesalius and his artist, Calcar, had worked. Cushing also longed to trace the history of Isabella Crabbe, the English mother of Vesalius, but was never able to find time for this.

He had remarkable general historical knowledge, as for example when, on a journey between two hospitals behind the lines in France in 1917 he insisted on making a detour to see what remained of the village of Crecy. With the aid of a small boy he found an old weathered granite cross with the inscription of Froissart cut on it recalling the heroic end of Jean of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, at the battle of Crecy in 1346.8 Blind John of Bohemia, Cushing recalled, was one of 11 princes killed that day. His feathered insignia "were taken by the Black Prince, who had commanded a division of the English side, and now graces the arms of the Prince of Wales."

The reader of Cushing's witty yet scholarly essays and addresses cannot believe that all this erudition was accomplished in those fragments of time remaining from the intense activity of a busy surgical career. There are some clues to this mystery in the family history. Three or four of his most interesting essays relate to colonial medicine and the establishment of the first medical schools in Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Cleveland. These are truly remarkable for their freshness and stories of frontier physicians. When one reads John Fulton's absorbing history of the eight generations of Cushings in direct descent from Matthew Cushing, who emigrated in 1638 to Hingham, Massachusetts, from Hingham, Norfolk, one finds the source for most of this colonial interest.7 Harvey was the fourth physician in line, descended from David Cushing, who married a widow with the fascinating name of Freelove Brown, and practiced in Cheshire township. David is described as a "forehanded man," a "thinking and sensible man" and collected a library. John Fulton calls him the prototype of Harvey. No wonder then, that Harvey should be steeped in the founding of Dartmouth8 and Yale medical schools by Nathan Smith who had also practiced in Cheshire township in the same period. Likewise grandfather Erastus, who moved to Cleveland Village in 1835, whose portrait hangs in the Cleveland Medical Library, was a contemporary of...